**ORMN SUCCESS STORY**

**IT TAKES A VILLAGE:**

**Moving Forward with Master Naturalist basic training class during COVID-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic affected so many aspects of daily life: work, school, shopping, family life, how people interacted with each other. The list goes on, and the Old Rag Master Naturalist chapter’s 2020 basic training for new volunteers was among those activities threatened by the pandemic.

ORMN volunteers are the heart and soul of our nonprofit organization. They are the workers on more than 140 approved projects in our six-county catchment area. Volunteers also perform such vital administrative duties as governance, financial management, Master Naturalist certification and maintenance, and data collection. What this means is that recruitment and training of new volunteers is a very important function of ORMN. So when the pandemic hit right before Class X (2020) was to begin, it created significant challenges for our chapter. Many ORMN chapter members supported the effort to make sure Class X stayed connected and involved with our chapter. Led by the efforts of the Basic Training Committee, ORMN rose to the challenge with ***creative approaches***, ***flexibility*** and a ***positive attitude***. Here is our story:

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**Challenge – All in-person meetings were suspended**

The Basic Training Committee (BTC), under the leadership of Co-Chairs Jeff Stehm and Bonnie Beers, had put all the components in place for the 2020 class (nicknamed Class Xceptional as it would be the 10th class offered by ORMN). That included the curriculum, room arrangements, scheduled presenters and materials to be provided to the class. Classes were to begin in April. And then the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The State VMN program put out COFID guidance limiting groups to more than 15 and other restrictions. ORMN took the guidance to heart and, in an abundance of caution for the safety of its members and trainees, cancelled in-person classes. But the chapter was determine to maintain Class X’s cohesion

In the absence of regular classes, everyone recognized the need to create a sense of camaraderie among the 17 trainees in a different way. Bonnie initiated the monthly conference calls. Topics varied from journaling to recommendations on good naturalist books to projects that could be done alone or with a small group respecting social distancing. These calls always included an “open mike” for the trainees to share their experiences, questions, and ideas on other activities the class could consider. Mentors were invited to participate and frequently shared experiences and insights. One of the telecon discussions led to a VMN web-presentation about fireflies.

**Challenge - State protocol did not allow trainees to earn volunteer hours until after completing Risk Management class work**

The BTC recognized the value of trainees getting involved in chapter projects as soon as possible – and appreciated the fact that earning volunteer hours toward the annual 40-hour requirement would be a strong motivator. They successfully negotiated with VMN for support of this approach, with the caveat that trainees had to successfully complete the Risk Management training before hours could be earned. Bill Birkhofer offered two online interactive sessions that fulfilled VMN requirements. Many of the trainees are now actively participating in a variety of ORMN projects and sharing their experience with their classmates.

**Challenge – Developing a sense of collegiality among Class X members**

One of the things Master Naturalists often share is strong friendships and valued camaraderie that develops among class members. Bonnie and Kathleen Aucoin, who had joined as co-chair in August, decided to schedule class field trips as a way to build this camaraderie and introduced Class X to other chapter members. The first field trip was to the Monarch Larva Monitoring Lab run by ORMN member Carolyn Smith. Trainees observed monarch larva in various stages of development and learned about the life cycle of this seminal insect. They also went into one of the registered milkweed fields to observe monarch larva in various stages of development. [Side note: This field trip was so successful that another was scheduled and attended by 10 interested ORMN members for Continuing Education credit.] The second field trip was to Rappahannock County Park, where trainees were able to observe a variety of projects, including bluebird house monitoring, invasive plant removal, restoration projects, and stream data collection and monitoring.

**Challenge – Keeping the momentum going**

After consultation with both VMN and ORMN leadership, the BTC made the commitment to begin the official Master Naturalist training classes via Zoom. Additional ORMN members helped out. Bill Birkhofer did the legwork to schedule the Madison Cooperative Extension Service site as a hub for the Program Coordinators to run Zoom classes (and as a possible venue should restrictions be lifted). Alex Bueno volunteered to be a tech advisor for Class X members who needed support accessing digital resources, e.g. Google Classroom.  After COVID, he and Barry Buschow spent hours creating a Zoom account and learning Zoom logistics so the class could both meet and also save video of meetings in Dropbox. This required a significant time commitment by both them and other ORMN members: learning, coordinating and negotiating Zoom sessions; scheduling and supporting presenters, many of whom had never done a Zoom presentation; and assisting trainees in using Zoom.

“The launch of the online class reflects the tenacity, commitment and deep bench of talent in the ORMN chapter.  Bonnie, Jeff, Alex and the Education Committee shaped the "traditional" class and then turned 180 degrees to bring it to life via Zoom.  I liken my role to the understudy who steps out of the chorus and joins the soprano on opening night for the big duet.  (I think of Bonnie as the Julie Andrews of BTC X!)  So many others created the production and I am honored to contribute as I learn in the role.”

--Kathleen Aucoin, co-chair of the BTC

Assessing what might be needed moving forward, a fall pilot of 3 to 4 initial training sessions was proposed to see how remote classes might work. For the remaining training sessions, Kathleen designed three contingency models, which the Basic Training Committee considered, approving a plan to continue classes during the first quarter of 2021 with field-trips in spring when the weather is likely to be more hospitable.

As part of the fall class sequence, Dorothy Tepper and Alex Bueno are collaborating to create a Virtual Audio-Video tour, Geology of the Blue Ridge. Photos of nine sites along the Blue Ridge Parkway appear on PowerPoint slides overlaid with an audio guide that highlights features of each site. Class X members will be able to view this guide at home, and download it to accompany their on-site tour in the fall. This tool, born of necessity, will be a valuable resource in the future.

Everybody was in a learning mode for the first session but now classes are scheduled through April and participation by trainees and mentors is active during each session.

**Volunteer recruits respond**

All of the above efforts worked because of the ongoing and active participation from the members of Class X:

* All members picked up their book bundles in March in order to begin readings even when classes were indefinitely postponed.
* All members completed Risk Management training online in order to begin recording volunteer hours.
* Most participated actively in monthly teleconference meetings and many have attended informal field trips.
* A growing number of members have become active as volunteers in the ORMN approved projects. As of October 19, Class X trainees have logged in almost 400 volunteer hours. Trainees are truly beginning their commitment as budding Master Naturalists to “education, outreach and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within their communities.”

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“Our success has been due to the collective effort of many people.  The real credit goes to ORMN as an organization that pulls together even during a challenging time to accomplish its mission.”

-- Bonnie Beers, co-chair of the BTC

It should be noted as a result of the commitment of the Basic Training Committee and that of the many other ORMN members who supported the efforts described above, Class X is well on its way to completing the required classroom and field work required to earn Master Naturalist certification and becoming full-fledged ORMN volunteers. And that’s a fine ending to this story!